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THE MAKING OF GEORGE SESSIONS PERRY

by Garna L. Christian

George Sessions Perry, one of Texas' most acclaimed fiction writers and journalists during the 1940s and 1950s, crossed the oceans four times, visited and wrote of virtually every major American city, and was at ease with the lights of the literary world. But, aside from passing the summers in the cooler environment of Guilford, Connecticut, Perry lived more of his life in the family home and acquired farm in his native Rockdale, Texas. A familiar and unpretentious presence in his Milam County birthplace, the tall, brawny author could be seen conversing in the streets with old friends or instant acquaintances, his broad pleasant face registering the obvious pleasure of the meeting. This gregarious friend to everyone marked an unmistakable contrast to the alienated young man of only a few years earlier. Perry's biographers have noted the transformation of his writing from the somber, unmarketable prose of the struggling youth to the more upbeat and commercially successful products of his maturity. Equally challenging, and unaddressed, is the accompanying transformation of the town critic to the town booster.[1]

In common with members of a generation who reached adulthood in the Great Depression, Perry experienced a decline in economic security as a young man, but less than most. Emotional, more than financial, losses molded his formative years. Born May 5, 1910, as an only child to Andrew and Laura Perry, young George had lost both parents by age thirteen. A modest inheritance from his father, a local druggist, allowed him and his eccentric grandmother, who is immortalized in the novel *My Granny Van*, a marginally comfortable existence. Perry's lack of academic application resulted in enrollment in a military academy and three unsuccessful attempts to pass his college freshman year.[2]

Keen observation and memory provided Perry the tools to recreate many of these episodes in the personalized fiction he wrote after he returned from Europe and North Africa at age twenty-one. For six frustrating years, the last four shared with his wife Claire Hodges, Perry poured his reflections and convictions into dozens of short stories and what he later called "a half dozen unpublishable novels." In the main the writings portrayed a gloomy and bitter view of life, exceptions lying in the doggerel-like poetry and some of the humorous and potboiler short stories. Presumably the first short story submitted and rejected, bearing a date of September 15, 1931, described the transfer of Moroccan captives to a waiting prison ship: "They all continued to stare into the clear blue nothingness that formed an indistinguishable horizon beyond the bow as the old, gray iron seahorse hauled up her anchors and sailed off with another cargo of living dead men to that wretched eternity, Devil's Island."[3]

Perry left several autobiographical novels, "The Story of Jim" and "Portrait of the Morning," which closely track the author's life and indicate that his

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early pessimism and disillusion sprang from an acute sensitivity. As an adult, the protagonist Jim Cowen still remembered the remorse that overcame the small child when he inadvertently killed his kitten and the unfairness of a principal and teacher spanking him for a misconduct which he did not commit. Jim suffered a deep sense of shame when he stood helpless as a cowhand unmercifully beat a stray cow, and, subsequently, a white man whipped a Negro. He loved his father even more than his mother, whom he "loved very much," but recoiled from them during their serious illnesses. The loss of the character's father convinced him that every promising beginning ended in disappointment and that "God had lost his magic." He refused to allow his grandmother to console him and distanced himself from his mother, who now appeared "a little flustered and helpless and on the verge of crying." The bitterness at his father's death consumed him at the volunteer fire department's annual oyster supper. The boy considered the speakers who praised his father's service as fire chief insincere and wished that they would die of ptomaine poisoning "like laughing forgetful hogs." "Furious and hurt and with the tears streaming," Jim exited by the back door and returned home.[4]

Convinced that "his geographical position must be responsible" for his pain, Perry, as Cowen, looked forward to his departure for Allen Academy in Bryan, Texas. He was anxious for his mother, who had accompanied him on the train, to leave and then felt ashamed for his callousness. After turning the corner, he realized for the first time the desolate look of the red brick dormitory. Jim's apprehensions grew when he observed a solitary student crying, although he pretended not to notice to spare the boy embarrassment. In the distance the protagonist heard a group of laughing students hazing a freshman: "Each whack made [his] heart stop for a second." Notwithstanding Cowen's continued hatred for the principal, he seemed to adjust to military school life after the ominous beginning, as depicted in a humorous description of a foiled attempt by the cadet and several friends to elude curfew. The academy instilled in him a new confidence as he returned home during vacation. Jim sought to convey his self-esteem to the townspeople by wearing his uniform, adjusting the chinstrap to the precise angle, and carefully maintaining a military posture. He shook hands with someone he had never greeted before, but waited disappointedly for the customers in the drugstore to notice him.[5]

At the academy Jim learned of his mother's suicide in a Northeastern city hotel room. In one of the autobiographical accounts, the young man planned to avenge her death by killing her second husband, whom he blamed for her unhappiness. A sense of duty, rather than outrage against his stepfather or grief for his mother, moved him to action. Determined to cane the man to death, the youth called at his victim's house, only to find that he was out of town. In the story, Cowen knew that he would not make another attempt, but satisfied himself with having acted properly. While it is unclear whether Perry recounted the incident from memory or fantasy, the marriage, separation, and suicide definitely occurred and the author later expressed regret for desiring to kill his stepfather. Alternating emotions of guilt and satisfaction arising from

adherence to private or public expectations haunted Perry throughout his life.[6]

While Perry emphasized in his early writings the primacy of principle over public opinion, many of his actions suggested a craving for acceptance. He disliked physical contact, yet participated in boxing, basketball, and football, despite enjoying "no confidence" in them. These self-imposed challenges demonstrated Perry's lifelong commitment to facing down fears, such as fishing in deep water despite a horror of snakes. Nevertheless, the Perry figure stated a different reason for quitting football: "The terror and physical pain, he could endure. But that he was ridiculous he could not." Cowen managed to persuade students to elect him cheerleader, at which he physically exhausted himself, and later successfully rejoined the football team. The gregarious side of Perry surfaced again when he took up several musical instruments and, according to a Rockdale resident, conducted a band for a time. Alcohol lay at the center of much of the young man's socializing at school, college, and afterwards. Of his first drink of wine as a teenager, Perry had Cowen say: "However much of an ass he might have seemed to everyone else, he had become, for that brief moment, what he had always wanted to be...a god, beautiful, radiant, immortal." Heavy drinking, even though accompanied by "violent and extended nausea," bonded Cowen with other young men.[7]

In later years Perry treated his three attempts at a university education lightly, stating that his inability to spell doomed him to repeatedly fail freshman English. Judging from some ribald stories drawn from his term at Southwestern University, Perry's social life continued to revolve around drinking. Anecdotal sketches presented his future wife, Claire, whom he met at the Georgetown campus, as quick-witted, popular, and tolerant of his binges, which often led to broken dates. He recorded a less saccharine experience from Purdue in which Perry/Cowen angered a wealthy great grandfather by getting drunk and almost missing a dinner invitation. The old gentlemen, "who had a lot of money and nobody in particular to will it to," told the young man that the misstep had cost him $50,000 and "if he did it again he would cut him off without a cent." Apparently, a subsequent turn at the University of Houston produced little or no literary grist for Perry's mill.[8]

A composition in Perry's files illuminates a less raucous side of his university years. Entitled "A Transvaluation of the Terms 'Good' and 'Bad,'" the essay propounded a bleak philosophy at odds with the writer's customary idealism and personal generosity.

> When man sees himself as he is rather than as he thinks he should be[,] he can certainly legislate more accurately. When he knows that inherently he is a warrior and not an angel he can protect himself from himself...He will no longer live a repressed, niggardly life based on hopes of an individual reward in heaven...During the span of his fighting career he will have been noble, life will have been a magnificent interim between two seas of darkness...[M]an has, in an effort to create or maintain some self respect, wrongly conceived the terms 'Good' and 'Bad'....All moral laws were contained in two honest and unvarnished sentences: 'Kill to eat and live. Do not be killed and eaten.'[9]

Professorial comments indicate that more than bad spelling stood between Perry and a college degree. Indignant responses punctuated the paper: "Nuts again;" "False conjecture;" "No;" and "Ignorant arrogant effrontery."[10]

Perry managed two lengthy journeys from Central Texas across the Atlantic in 1930 and 1931. On the first he sailed as a deck boy on a freighter; for the second and lengthier voyage, he applied some of his inheritance to a passenger ticket. The author's counterpart, Cowen, found the initial experience exhilarating, despite bad food and a merciless master. Briefly jumping ship in Holland, the young man marveled at the prosperity which contrasted vividly with his native ground and wondered at the absence of sharecroppers and slums. Yet he felt lonely in Europe and searched for a familiar face. Described as "Joe" in a subsequent short story, the Perry-like character expanded on his mixed emotions about the familiar and the new:

> He thought he probably had what he had gone far. Now he was nearly home. He felt bad. A bewildered boy wanting to run away from something had got on a ship and gone...Yet away he was lonely, though refreshed. But he had always been lonely...He had become curious to see what he had run away from...He wished someone would mistake him for an old acquaintance and speak to him cordially.[11]

On the second trip, Perry and his literary alter ego spent six months in Algiers before the press for money and domestic responsibilities called them home. Once back in Rockdale, or its fictional equivalents Blackjack and Hackberry, Perry began his writing career in earnest.[12]

A third unpublished autobiographical novel, "After Many Days," continued Perry/Cowen's story through his frustrating attempts to succeed as an author in the early 1930s. Presumably written after Perry's marriage of 1933, it depicts Jim's wife, Mary, sharing the household with him and his grandmother. Like his short stories of the time, this lengthy work centers on character study and local color at the expense of plot. The concentration on subjectivity allowed Perry to burrow deeper into his own soul, through the thoughts of the struggling protagonist, exposing darker currents than previously because of its contemporaneity. Whereas "Portrait of the Morning" climaxed on an epiphany with Cowen's triumph over a sea storm and "The Story of Jim" concluded placidly with his marriage, "After Many Days" portrayed a pained and wounded young man beset by enforced frugality, a seemingly impenetrable publishing market, and alienation from the mainstream community.[13]

Having traveled, read, and dreamed widely, the young author related awkwardly to other residents, few if any of whom shared his experiences and aspirations. Perry's character "made no pretense at being interested in the welfare of the community" and believed himself perceived as "[t]hat big guy...that don't do nothin[']] but hunt and fish." In the rare periods when the Cowens were not counting pennies to buy books they could not afford or collaborating to place Jim's words on paper, he entered into a subterranean world of Negroes, Mexicans, unconventional whites, and poverty-ridden

farmers. Here he enjoyed some comfort and commonalty of spirit within a larger society that Perry painted in bleak hues:

> Once, in the last century, Hackberry was the end of the railroad. Men came from scores of miles to hold commerce with her...[But] the railroad had long since been extended. Her advantage gone, Hackberry remains, waits, gently reclines...Nothing has recently been or is soon to be.
>
> The summer night is seldom cool, the day never, except when rain comes to swell parched earth...[and] shock waiting people with the knowledge that something important has happened.[14]

Perry's description of the townspeople matched their unfavorable environment. A leading merchant charged exorbitant interest on credit purchases, eliciting a bitter response from a local farmer: "I can do as I want? I can starve or pay you sixty per cent interest on what I buy this month and a hundred and twenty on what I buy next month." Cowen perceived a restaurant owner as "a hirsute rodent-like thing that did not even belong to the town." White boys made sport of chasing and stoning blacks who ventured outside their section of town: "Jap never stepped on Main Street completely unexpecting or unafraid." The "finely gowned and jeweled and perfumed ladies" in a restaurant "looked on with...disgust" at an Anglo girl "eating with a Mexican family." Town gossips constituted a significant part of the population:

> Gossip...was...probably the only thing which gave greater pleasure to the town than the movie house....The most trivial matters attained amazing circulation, particularly when they went to establish or endorse village impressions...such as the parsimony of this one, the dishonesty of that one, or, finally, the looseness of a given woman. Extra marital alliances, among the merchant class, of which there were generally a half dozen or so of long standing, were continually referred to with avidity...[and] gave far more pleasure than...pain.[15]

The Perry-like character also turned his critical gaze toward family members and loved ones. The "cold unvarnished hatred" between Cowen and his uncle had subsided only after Jim reached the age of maturity, which released the guardian's control of "his little inheritance." He adored his quarrelsome grandmother but loathed her racism: "No one had ever heard of Jap stealing, but he was a [Negro] and it was part of [her] recognized prime laws...that all...would steal, and that none of them would work unless watched or better still unless each simple movement...was directed by white mentality." Even his beloved wife, Mary, suffered from analysis. His constant companion, she hunted, fished, advised, listened, ensured a quiet workplace while he wrote, and typed his illegible scrawl into readable manuscripts. Although Mary had far exceeded Jim academically, he considered her "not designed...for original thought...very nearly a perfect extrovert." To Jim, Mary existed to nurture his creative spirit, while he molded her to his image: "All of her interests must lean toward him, her desires find satisfaction through him...she must concentrate her entire life upon him...Though in a sense inferior to and secondary to his work she was also essential to it...."[16]

Cowen harbored conflicting emotions about the underprivileged with

whom he sympathized: "Though Jim was very fond of most negroes, and liked in no way to make them feel inferior and restrained in his presence, he was not accustomed to having them behave rudely to him...." A sense of duty vied with humanitarian concern in his protective instincts toward minorities:

> Jim consciously regretted that he would probably get beaten [by a drunken white man whom he had confronted for chasing a black] because of a negro whom he most particularly did not like because of...being one of the most insincere people that he knew. Yet in instances such as these Jim was not really his own master; he was the slave of a hatred and cruelty, that however he might chafe and wish to withdraw drove him on.[17]

Jim saw himself as destined to elevate humankind by his writings and his actions, but also fated to suffer external and internal condemnation when not attaining his highest ideals. While decrying society's failure to recognize his mission, Cowen alternatively felt undeserving of acclaim. After mentally struggling with whether to defend the disliked victim, Jim resolved, "If I do not act I am nothing; I am incapable of active allegiance to the most holy hatred of my soul." The writer's actions must accord with his supreme goal of immortalizing in literature the townspeople, who both attracted and repelled him:

> He thought of their tight barren lives. These people were as all people were. They were the ones he knew best of all the earth, in whose dull existences it was his lot to find meaning...They are not brave or witty or gay. Nor accomplished...[Nevertheless]he would bring forth his people from the steaming, stinking guts of the earth..[and] show them the unsprouted seeds of beauty and dignity and decency within them."[18]

"He was inclined," Perry wrote of his character, "to look upon them quite as if he had created them and it was his duty to understand them." He even attempted to fathom the characteristic he most despised, racial prejudice:

> The poor whites, un-understanding, brutalized by poverty. The ones I want to help...Oh you miserable, who persecute the most miserable...Poor miserable fools. I want to love you.[19]

In his darker moods, Cowen displayed less forgiveness for himself than for the frailties of others. Exhausted from long hours of transferring his thoughts to notebook tablets and the growing accumulation of rejection slips, he mocked his "wounded Christ" fixation of wanting to feed and immortalize the people. He mourned his transformation from a dashing, incorruptible youth to a plodding, uncreative hack. Jim considered himself a hypocrite for "want[ing] to live the life of a savage but...a subsidized savage, with benefit of machines, clothed, armed, transported, and entertained...." and for "his moments of extremist optimism [when] he imagined," himself, almost prophetically, "writing witty, timely paragraphs and squibs that were greedily bought by a national newspaper syndicate." Such periods moved him to haughtily reject advice from his uncle and others that he write more commercially:

> At odd times I have actually tried hard to write tripe that might pay a little something, but the result was just plain ridiculous. If I wind up in the ashcan, I won't think I made a bad choice. I never really had a choice...I may not ever be a big shot...but I'm doing the only thing I want and the only thing I can. Money won't buy what I want; I've got to make it or do without.[20]

A fear of having too little time to avoid anonymity formed the words of the author who would capitulate to suicidal urges at age forty-six:

> Seventy short years, more probably fifty in all, about thirty good ones, that is productive ones. I really haven't got much time to spare...[He was] jealous that another man and not himself had created [the Sistine Chapel]...The tiny piece just finished seemed hardly worth bothering about beside the grandeur of this thing he was reaching for.[21]

The somber moods by no means occupied all of young Perry's time, though they underlay the lighter moments. He conversed animatedly and at length with literary friends and relatives, adored his wife's parents, and came to terms with his penurious uncle, whose familiarity with the foibles of locals provided Perry with rich source materials for the humorous stories. He even enjoyed acclaim in small literary markets. On one occasion, however, Perry's composure snapped when an editor clumsily revised one of his short stories:

> Be quite sure that the sound of your name, however far in the future, will make my fingers itch for your throat. If the manuscript did not comply with the moral concepts of Dubuque, Iowa, why did you not return it to me?...Don't tell me it was for artistic reasons. I have gone without advice this far and I shall continue. If it was to prevent offending the delicate sensibilities of your readers, I say God damn them...I require no apology. I have had quite enough of you.[22]

Confidence in his abilities inspired Perry to lecture comedian Bob Burns on the quality of his popular radio show. Apparently responding to Burns' on air request for program suggestions, Perry promised "to convert [your show]...from a pulp paper diversion, not strictly fresh, into a Thursday night necessity." Perry sent him the first of several intended scripts, the original centering around Uncle Buford falling drunkenly out of a wagon, and even drew up a work schedule. The comic begged out of a commitment, but, interestingly, a film studio called Perry to Hollywood two years later to script the Burns movie, "The Arkansas Traveler."[23]

Perry broke into the major magazine market in 1937, after "years...[of] deny[ing] myself the recognized comforts of society in order to write entirely and only what I have pleased." Ironically, the *Saturday Evening Post* bought "Edgar and the Dark Morass," a short story of rural tomfoolery far removed from the author's autobiographical efforts. A literary agent, and exhaustion of funds, had convinced him of what earlier advisers could not, to turn his talents to commercially viable pieces. The check for $500 brought an instant celebration by the Perrys, who splurged on a movie; the story brought recognition at home and abroad. The magazine, which provided George a handsome income

for much of the remainder of his life, purchased all American, Canadian, and South American rights to the article. An old friend expressed a feeling of vindication, which Perry must have shared: "I hope, and also honestly believe, that you are above a certain mean and petty reaction which I am certainly not above. Specifically, I am delighted at the wholesome effect this will have on your detractors." A cousin, 600 miles distant, wrote to boast she had known him "when" and added, tellingly, that she had heard "you have shaken Rockdale to its foundations."[24]

Perry's literary stock rose with the proximate publications of two acclaimed novels, *Walls Rise Up* and *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*, while his local popularity reached heroic proportions. No longer regarding him as "[t]hat big guy...that don't do nothin[']] but hunt and fish," Rockdaleans embraced him even after some critics bemoaned Perry's later concentration on magazine journalism. Today a historical marker and research center honoring the Central Texas town's most beloved son belie the earlier alienation. The collective affection for George Sessions Perry obliterated the distance between him and his neighbors, validating his self-worth and permitting him to express love for the people who had regarded him as a curiosity. An undated guest column by Perry in the local newspaper signaled the author's transformation: the National Book Award winner, sprinkling the pronoun "we" throughout the essay, suggested a municipal swimming pool for Rockdale. He and the community were one.[25]

NOTES

[1]The major biographies of Perry are Stanley G. Alexander, *George Sessions Perry* (Austin, 1967); Robert G. Cowser, "A Biographical and Critical Interpretation of George Sessions Perry (1910-1956)" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Christian University, 1965); and, the most detailed, Maxine Cousins Hairston, *George Sessions Perry: His Life and His Works* (Austin, 1973). For gregariousness see *Houston Chronicle*, November 23, 1947, and Lewis Nordyke, "George Sessions Perry: The Rockdale Reporter," Texas Parade (October, 1952), pp. 30-32.

[2]"George Sessions Perry," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, February, 1943; Cowser, "Biographical," p. 7; George Sessions Perry, *My Granny Van, The Running Battle of Rockdale, Texas* (New York, 1949).

[3]First quote, Stanley J. Kunitz (ed.), "George Sessions Perry (May 5, 1910-)" *Twentieth Century Authors*, First Supplement (New York, 1955), p. 773; Block quote, "Departure," Perry, Works, George Sessions Perry Collection, Harry Ransom Research Center (HRRC), University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

[4]"The Story of Jim," Chapter 2, pp. 4-5, 6-7, Chapter 5, p.1; first quote, Chapter 7, p. 1; fourth quote, Chapter 8, p. 2; fifth quote, Chapter 8, p. 3; third quote, Chapter 9, p. 1; "Portrait of the Morning," pp. 147, 165, second quote, p.174, Perry, Works, HRRC.

[5]"Portrait," first quote, pp. 215, 225-235, HRRC; "Story," second quote, Chapter 9, p. 3, HRRC.

[6]"Portrait," pp. 260-265, HRRC; Hairston, "George Sessions Perry," p. 9.

[7]"Portrait," first quote, p. 195; second quote, pp. 199, 200-203; third quote, p. 237; "After Many Days," fourth quote, p. 357, HRRC.

[8]Kunitz, *Twentieth Century Authors*, p. 773; "Portrait," pp. 345-349, HRRC; "Story," quotes in Chapter 15, pp. 1-2, HRRC.

[9]Perry, Works, HRRC.

[10]Perry, Works, HRRC.

[11]Alexander, *George Sessions Perry*, p. 9; "Portrait," pp. 373-421, HRRC; quote from "The Anthem," a Short Story by Nick Kalantar (pseudo.), Perry, Works, HRRC.

[12]George Sessions Perry, Texas, *A World in Itself* (Gretna, 1975), p. 6; Kalantar (pseudo.), "Frost in the Garden of Allah," Perry, Works, HRRC.

[13]"After Many Days," Perry, Works, pp. 479, 532; "Portrait," p. 431; "Story," Chapter 27, p. 5, HRRC.

[14]"After Many Days," first quote, p. 312; second quote, p. 718, block quote in Preamble, HRRC. Rockdale, 134 miles northwest of Houston, was founded in 1874 as the designated railhead of the International Railroad. Its population from 1880 to 1940, at ten year intervals, was 1,185; 1,505; 2,515; 2,073; 3,323; 2,204; 2,136. See Mrs. E.V. (Ida Jo) Marshall (ed.), *Rockdale Centennial: A History of Rockdale, Texas, 1874-1974* (Rockdale, n.d.), pp. 2,7, 24.

[15]"After Many Days," first quote, p. 25; second quote, p. 30; third quote, p. 42; fourth quote, p. 214; block quote, p. 655, HRRC.

[16]"After Many Days," second quote, p. 63; first quote, p. 296; fifth quote, p. 613; third and fourth quotes, pp. 614- 616, HRRC.

[17]"After Many Days," first quote, p. 478; block quote, p. 482, HRRC.

[18]"After Many Days," first quote, p. 482; second quote, pp. 300, 748, HRRC.

[19]"After Many Days," second quote, p. 187; first quote, p. 622, HRRC.

[20]"Story," first quote, Chapter 17, p. 2; "After Many Days," third quote, p. 313; block quote, p. 504; second quote, p. 721, HRRC.

[21]"After Many Days," p. 504, HRRC.

[22]Hairston, *George Sessions Perry*, pp. 13-14; as example of acclaim in small circles, the editor of The *Latin Quarterly* wrote Perry: "Thanks for your stories. Liked them all more or less, though some were too strong for our editorial standards." Ruth Widen to Perry, April 21, 1934, n.p., Perry, Letters Recip. "I-L;" quote in Copy [to *Dubuque Dial*], December 6, 1934, Rockdale, Texas, Letters Recip. "D."

[23]Bob Burns to Perry, May 27, 1937, Hollywood, California, Perry, Works, HRRC; quote in Burns to Perry, June 27, 1936, Hollywood, California, Perry, Works, HRRC; John Mason Brown, "King-Sized Texan George Sessions Perry," *Saturday Review*, August 15, 1959, p. 14.

[24]First quote in Copy, December 6, 1934, Rockdale; Edith Haggard to Perry, August 26, 1937, [New York City], Letters Recip., Curtis Brown Ltd.; Telegram, Mother and Dad [Hodges] to Perrys at Rockdale, August 26, 1937, Beaumont, Texas, Letters Recip., "H."; second quote, Hollis Mills to Perry at Beaumont, October 18, 1937, Washington, D.C., Letters Recip., "M."; third quote, Eleanor Warren to My Dear Cousin George, October 21, 1937, El Paso, Texas, Letters Recip., "W-Z."

[25]James Ward Lee, "George Sessions Perry," *Classics of Texas Fiction* (Dallas, 1987), p. 123; Edwin W. Gaston, Jr. pairs Perry with John Steinbeck as a major regional novelist of the 1930s in *The Early Novel of the Southwest* (Albuquerque, 1961), p. 201; quote in "After Many Days," p. 718; *The Rockdale Reporter*, September 18, 1997; "Rambling Around Rockdale with George Sessions Perry," *The Rockdale Reporter*, n.d., in Perry, Works, HRRC.